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ABSTRACT

Many states are adopting joint custody legislation to support continued relationships between children of parental divorce and both of their biological parents. This study examined the effects of joint versus maternal legal custody, whether or not the stepfather had biological children from a prior marriage, and the sex and age of an adolescent on the custodial mother's remarriage. Middle class remarried mothers (N=84) and their husbands each completed a questionnaire measuring marital satisfaction; competition between the father and stepfather; role ambiguity for the stepfather role; and the mother's relationship with her ex-spouse. The findings revealed that marital satisfaction was highest for couples with girls in joint custody. Mothers of early adolescent daughters reported better relations with ex-spouses than did mothers of later adolescent daughters; no difference was reported for sons. Stepfathers with no prior children reported more competition with the biological father than did stepfathers with biological children. Couples in joint custody arrangements with stepfathers who had no prior children reported the most role ambiguity. The results suggest that custody decisions made at the time of divorce can have an impact on subsequent remarriage, and that stepfamilies need help in creating roles for stepparents that complement biological parents' roles. (Author/NB)

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Impact of Custody Arrangement and Family Structure on Remarriage

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Impact of Custody Arrangement and Family Structure on Remarriage

ABSTRACT. This research examined the effects of joint versus maternal legal custody, whether or not the stepfather had biological children from prior marriage, and sex and age of adolescent on custodial mother's remarriage. Eighty-four middle-class remarried mothers and their husbands each completed a questionnaire in the family's home. Marital satisfaction was highest for couples with girls in joint custody. Mothers of early adolescent daughters reported better relations with ex-spouses than mothers of later adolescent daughters; no difference was reported for sons. Stepfathers who had no prior children reported more competition with the biological father than stepfathers who were also fathers to their own biological children. Couples in joint custody arrangements with stepfathers who had no prior children reported the most role ambiguity (disagreement and confusion about the stepfather's role in the family). The results suggest that custody decisions made at the time of divorce can have an impact on subsequent remarriage, and that stepfamilies need help in creating roles for

stepparents that complement biological parents' roles.

Custody

Increasing numbers of states are adopting some form of joint custody legislation in an effort to support continued relationships between children of parental divorce and both of their biological or adoptive parents (Weitzman, 1985). In this paper joint custody refers to joint legal custody, which means that both parents have the right to make decisions (e.g., education, religion, medical treatment) about the child. Although a few children experience joint residential custody (live with each parent about halftime), about 90% of minor children still reside mainly with mothers after parental divorce (Weitzman, 1985).

Joint custody arrangements necessitate continued interaction between divorced parents. One unacknowledged potential impact of this arrangement is the effect of sharing custody with an ex-spouse on the marital relationship in a remarriage. This study examined the effect of joint versus maternal custody on the mother's remarriage and on aspects of the relationships between the new couple and the non-residential biological father.

From a family systems perspective, joint custody functions to keep the non-residential parent within the boundary of the residential parent's household, especially with regard to domains of family life that pertain to the

children. The situation is similar to Boss's (1977) description of boundary ambiguity in military families in which the fathers were missing in action. In those families, mothers and children often perceived the fathers to be within the boundary of the family system. Although the fathers were physically absent, they were psychologically present. In joint custody arrangements the non-residential parent (usually the father) is physically absent from the residential home also, but he is structurally (legally) and psychologically present as a part of the family, certainly for the biological children and for the residential parent, who shares child-related decisions with him. Although he does not live in the household, he legally has decision-making power that effects life within the residential parent's household. How does this effect the residential parent's remarriage? For example, does a new stepfather expect to be "man of the house", only to find that the roles of father and co-parent are already taken by a "man of the house" who does not live there but is very much a part of the family system?

Only two papers addressing the impact of custody arrangement on remarriage could be found in both the remarriage and the custody literatures. An early study by Bernard (1971) identified custody as a significant variable in the success of remarriages. She found "shared custody" to

be negatively correlated with "successful" remarriages for mothers, but positively correlated for fathers. Her findings would support the hypothesis that having the non-residential father in the new stepfather family system negatively affects the remarriage.

Based on clinical experience, Greif and Simring (1982) argue the opposite. They have observed joint custody arrangements to be supportive of the remarriage in the following ways: Stepparents are protected from pressure to parent their stepchildren. The residential parent and child may have less "symbiotic attachment". Co-parents in joint custody households have learned to cooperate and, therefore, can better withstand the stress of a third adult entering the system. The non-residential parent is less threatened by the new spouse, because his position with his child is legally protected and, therefore, more secure.

Underlying both of these papers is the theme of role ambiguity for the stepparent. What does it mean to be "husband" but not "father", or "wife" but not "mother", in a household with children? This problem of role ambiguity for stepparents is well documented in the remarriage literature (Giles-Sims, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1978), but the effect of custody arrangement on role ambiguity has not been studied.

Family Structure

A related focus of research has begun in the stepfamily literature. It also relates to stepfamily involvement with another household, but on the stepparent's "side of the family". Based on Cherlin's (1978) hypothesis that increases in structural complexity of the family would increase role strain in the husband-wife relationship and produce less marital satisfaction, researchers have tested the effect of simple (stepparent has no biological children from a prior marriage) versus complex (stepparent is a non-custodial biological parent) stepfamily structure on marital relationships. Couples in complex stepfamilies have reported more marital conflict than couples in simple stepfamilies (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1983), but studies of the impact of structural complexity on marital quality have had mixed results, some reporting lower marital quality for complex families (Clingempeel, 1981; Clingempeel & Brand, 1985) and some reporting no differences (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984).

The present study integrates these two research foci by testing the effect of both custody arrangement and structural complexity on aspects of residential mothers' remarriages. Because joint custody is associated with more contact between the non-residential parent and the stepfamily, amount of contact alone could account for any results of differential custody arrangement. Therefore, the effects of frequency of

child visitation with the non-residential father on the dependent measures were tested in the maternal custody subsample.

METHOD

Subjects

The convenience sample consisted of 84 caucasion mother-stepfather families with adolescent children; they lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. The households were middle- and upper-middle-class and 84% of the wives worked outside the home. The median family income was $60,000. The median length of the present marriages was 3.25 years. Twenty-one percent of the stepfamilies shared joint legal custody with a non-residential father; 79% had maternal custody. One third of the families has additional children born into the remarried family. The median age of the wives was 39; all had been divorced prior to remarriage. Nearly half of the wives had some graduate or professional school training; one fourth were college graduates and one fourth had at least some vocational schooling or college. The median age of the husbands was 38; 66% had been previously married; 47% had biological children from a prior marriage. Nearly two thirds of the husbands had some graduate or professional school training; one fifth were college graduates and the remaining 15% had some vocational school or college. The oldest or only adolescent living in the household at least half time

was the target adolescent. (In reality nearly all of the adolescents resided with their mothers and had a "visiting" status in their fathers' homes.) The adolescents were seventh through twelth graders; the median age was 15 and 50% were boys.

Instrument

Three forms of an assessment instrument were developed by the experimenter for the purpose of studying remarried families. The wife, husband, and youth forms consist of 160 psychologically oriented questions which had been generated to operationalize 20 constructs that relate to stepfamily adjustment. The questions were grouped conceptually and each group of questions was designed to be a subscale measuring one construct. The response options are on a four-point Likert scale. The mean of the items in each subscale form the individual family member's score for that subscale. The adults' forms also contain questions about demographics and other background information like visitation, custody, finances, etc.

Three of the subscales served as the dependent measures in the present analysis: marital satisfaction, reported by both husbands and wives; extent of competition between the stepfather and the non-residential father, reported by both husbands and wives; role ambiguity of the stepfather's role, a couple level score computed by a combination of husband-

wife discrepancy scores and individual responses. An individual item measured the quality of the wife's relationship with her ex-husband and only the wife's report was used.

Table 1 shows reliability and validity coefficients that were obtained for the three scales. Following are examples of individual questions from these three subscales and the individual item as they appear on the wife's form. (Wording on the husband's form is identical or analogous.)

Marital Satisfaction

1. "How satisfied am I with the way my husband and I solve differences?" (The response pattern ranged from "not satisfied" to "very satisfied".)
2. "Taking all things together, I would describe my marriage as..." (The response pattern ranged from "very happy" to "not happy".)

Competition between the Father and Stepfather

1. "My husband feels competitive with my child's natural father for their loyalty." (The response pattern ranged from "True" to "Not True".)
2. "My child's natural father is supportive of my husband's authority over the child". (The response pattern ranged from "True" to "Not True".)

Role Ambiguity for Stepfather Role

1."Ideally, to what extent SHOULD my husband be DISCIPLINING my child?" (The response pattern ranged from "It is not really his job." to "Fully, the same as a natural father.") (Husband-wife discrepancy score used)

2."Ideally, to what extent SHOULD my husband be NURTURING my child?" (same response pattern as above) (Husband-wife discrepancy used)

3."When it comes to stepfathering, I..." (The response pattern was "really do NOT know what my husband SHOULD be doing in this family", "am not sure", think I know", "know exactly what my husband SHOULD be doing in this family".)

Wife's Relationship with Ex-Spouse (Co-parental relationship)

1."My relationship with my ex-husband is..." (The response pattern was "friendly", "business-like", "hostile", "no contact".)

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedure

Potential subject families were identified through the personal and professional network of the author and referral by other participating families. In the initial telephone

contact, one of the spouses was told that the study addressed the adjustment of stepfamilies, and that the family members would be asked to complete questionnaires. The adult was asked to query his/her spouse and the adolescent about participation. If the spouses and the adolescent agreed to participate, a date and time were set. The instruments were administered in each family's home at the convenience of the family by the experimenter or a trained assistant. The family members completed their instruments independently.

Analysis

A 2x2x2x2 analysis of variance was computed for each of the dependent measures. The independent variables were custody arrangement, whether or not the stepfather had children from a prior marriage, sex of the adolescent, and age group of the adolescent (12-15 vs. 16-18). Only main effects and first order interactions were considered, because the number of subjects per cell in second and higher order interactions was small.

In order to test whether any findings for custody arrangement were simply a result of continued involvement of the non-residential father with his child, a second set of 2x2x2x2 analyses of variance were computed for each of the dependent measures, using only the subsample of families with maternal custody (n=66). Frequency of visitation (bi-weekly

or more vs. less than bi-weekly) was substituted for custody arrangement in the independent variables.

RESULTS

Marital Satisfaction

Neither custody arrangement, structural complexity, nor sex or age of adolescent had a main effect on marital satisfaction. However, a significant interaction between custody arrangement and sex of adolescent was reported by both husbands ($F(1,73) = 9.2$, $p<.01$) and wives ($F(1,73) = 3.7$, $p<.05$). Examination of Table 2 reveals that remarried couples sharing joint custody of adolescent girls reported being more satisfied with their marriages than couples with sole maternal custody of girls and couples with boys.

There were no significant results in the analogous analysis of husbands' and wives' marital happiness using the maternal custody subsample.

Insert Table 2 about here

Wife's Relationship with Ex-Spouse (Co-parental)

There were no main effects of the independent variables on the wife's report of the quality of the co-parenting relationship. A significant interaction between the age and sex of the adolescents showed the relationships to be perceived as more friendly when the divorced spouses were co-

parenting younger adolescent girls and least friendly when co-parenting older girls ($F(1,73) = 6.9$, $p<.01$)(see Table 2). There were no significant findings or trends in the analogous analysis with the maternal custody subsample.

Competition between Father and Stepfather

Analysis of the stepfathers' reports of competition between the men showed a main effect for structural complexity ($F(1,73) = 10.1$, $p<.01$). Stepfathers who did not have children outside the household reported more competition (see Table 2). Analysis of the mothers' reports showed an interaction between structural complexity and age of adolescent ($F(1,73) = 4.2$, $p=.04$). Only mothers of younger adolescents reported more competition between the men when the stepfather did not have children outside the household (see Table 2).

Analysis of the maternal custody subsample identified similar findings. More importantly, there was no relationship between frequency of visitation and competition between the father and stepfather.

Role Ambiguity for Stepfather Role

None of the independent variables had a main effect on role ambiguity. However, a significant interaction between custody arrangement and structural complexity identified couples in simple stepfamilies with joint custody to have the

highest level of role ambiguity for the stepfather ($F(1,73) = 5.2$, $p=.02$)(see Table 2).

Analysis of the maternal custody subsample revealed an interaction between adolescent's sex and amount of visitation with fathers ($F(1,55) = 5.2$, $p=.02$). Couples with adolescent boys who saw their fathers frequently reported less stepfather role ambiguity (mean = 1.6) than couples with boys who saw their fathers infrequently and couples with girls who saw their fathers frequently and infrequently (means = 2.1, 2.1, 2.0, respectively).

DISCUSSION

Marital Satisfaction

This study showed that custody arrangement can have an effect on the remarriage of mothers, and that the effect may be modulated by the sex of her children. The finding that the happiest remarriages were associated with joint custody of girls qualifies Bernard's (1971) finding that "shared custody" has a negative effect on mothers' remarriages; the difference between the present findings and the Bernard study may well be a function of the social changes that have occurred in 16 years between the two studies. The present study complements Greif & Simring's (1982) clinical observations that joint custody supports remarriages; the support appears to be particularly true in stepfamilies with girls. The study also complements Pink and Wampler's (1985)

finding that sex of stepadolescent had no effect on the couple's marital happiness; sex does appear to have an effect when custody arrangement is also considered. Furthermore, the lack of an analogous finding when frequency of visitation was substituted for custody in the maternal custody subsample suggests that it is the security of the legal agreement, not the regularity of contact between daughters' and their non-residential fathers, that is positively associated with mothers' and stepfathers' marital happiness.

The question then arises--Why is the presence of a father with a legal power base in the stepfamily household system associated with more marital happiness in stepdaughter families than in stepson families? Observations by clinicians and anthropologists suggest a possibility: With the lack of an incest taboo in the stepparent-stepchild relationships, sexual tension exists in these relationships, especially when the stepchild is an adolescent (Mead, 1970; Visher & Visher, 1979). Clingempeel's (1984) findings may be evidence of an attempt to cope with this tension; he found more detachment and less dimensions of love in stepfather-stepdaughter relationships than in stepfather-stepson relationships. Similarly, many studies have found girls in remarried families (most of which are maternal custody) to have more adjustment problems than boys (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987). All of this suggests that when biological

fathers of stepdaughters are legally part of the stepfamily system, this may protect the mothers' remarriages from sexual tension between stepfathers and stepdaughters and this may function to support the remarriage. Of course, this is conjecture and there may be other explanations for this finding.

The lack of family structure effect on marital satisfaction replicates Furstenburg & Spanier's (1984) findings and contradicts Clingempeel (1981) and Clingempeel and Brand (1985), who found lower marital quality in complex stepfamilies. Since both Clingempeel samples were limited to couples who had been married no more than three years and the present study was not, perhaps couples in complex stepfamilies are less satisfied and do redivorce more quickly, thereby leaving only the better adjusted complex stepfamilies in a subject pool which included older marriages.

Wife's Relationship with Ex-Spouse (Co-parental)

Neither the legal structure of custody arrangement nor the frequency of visitation had an effect on perceived quality of the co-parental relationship. Instead, the quality of the co-parenting relationship was a function of age and sex of the adolescents; in stepfamilies with girls, the relationship was better when the girls were younger than when they were older. Further research is needed to clarify how

girls' developmental stages may relate to the co-parental relationship.

Competition between Father and Stepfather

The finding that less competition between the men was reported in complex stepfamilies suggests that stepfathers who are already in the fathering role with their own biological children either are not attempting to be in the father role with their stepchildren or can co-father better. Since both men in these situations are both non-residential fathers, perhaps they have more empathy for each other. Contrary to Greif and Simring's (1982) hypothesis that joint custody would be associated with less competition, competition appears to be more a function of role expectation than custody arrangement per se.

Role Ambiguity

The interaction effect between custody arrangement and structural complexity on role ambiguity for stepfathers supports Boss's (1984) theory of boundary ambiguity. Couples in which the wife shared joint custody with an ex-spouse and the husband was not a biological father to children outside the stepfamily household reported the highest role ambiguity. When these results are considered with the competition results, it appears that when stepfathers with no prior children expect to fill the father role in the stepfamily and there already is a father legally within the boundary of the

stepfamily, the couple is less clear and has less agreement about the stepfather's role.

It appears that having been a biological father is an asset if one is marrying a woman with joint custody. Perhaps these experienced divorced fathers were more liberated from traditional father role expectations and were more sensitive to another father's rights and responsibilities, and/or they may have been able to communicate better with their wives about it. father in the stepfamily system.

The difference in the role ambiguity findings for the maternal custody subsample suggests that the legal structure of joint custody has a different effect on the remarried couple than adolescents' frequency of visitation with fathers. While joint custody was associated with more role ambiguity in simple stepfamilies, more contact with the non-residential father was associated with less role ambiguity in maternal custody stepfamilies, but only for boys. This suggests that role expectations are a function of structural variables and behavioral patterns.

Why wasn't frequent contact associated with less role ambiguity for couples with girls? This finding, the marital satisfaction finding, and other studies reporting sex differences suggest that there is a qualitative difference for remarried couples between life in stepfather-stepson families and life in stepfather-stepdaughter families.

Implications

Theoretical. This study has shown that family systems theory, particularly boundary ambiguity, and role theory provide useful frameworks in which to explain the effects of joint custody on the remarried family. Further, the findings that aspects of the remarried couple's relationship can be affected by structural relations with other households reaffirm the importance of a systemic approach to life in remarried families. This has implications for research, policy and therapy.

Research. Research with remarried families must consider variables from households to which they are linked, and test for interactions between these structural variables and the gender and age of children. More specifically, the present findings and others show the necessity for in-depth study of the couple and family dynamics in joint custody stepfamilies with both boys and girls. The gender differences found in this study may be a function of the adolescent being the same sex or cross sex as the stepparent, since the subjects are all stepfather families. Similar study of stepmother families is needed.

Policy. This study has legal and educational policy implications. Custody arrangements made at the time of divorce apparently can have effects on subsequent marriages. Lawmakers need to consider the long-range effects of the

joint versus sole custody arrangement. If the arrangement affects the adults' subsequent marriages, it is likely that they also will affect the children who live in the remarried households. Public education should respond to the growing numbers of adults who find themselves in joint custody situations with few successful models. Specifically, stepfathers with no prior children could benefit from role models of stepfathers who function as nurturing men in children's lives, complementing the biological father's role, rather than competing with it. Public education could liberate stepfathers from thinking they have to "father", and could model talking with one's wife about which of a variety of stepfather roles is most appropriate for their family, given factors like the availability of the biological father, child's age, etc.

Mediation and therapy. If these findings are replicated, mediators and therapists might want to share with clients the advantages of joint custody of girls for mothers' subsequent marital happiness. The findings suggest that mediators and therapists facilitate a meeting of all of the adults upon the remarriage of a joint custody co-parent for the purpose of negotiating and defining complementary roles for co-parents and stepparents.

Limitations

The results of this study must be considered to be tentative and in need of replication. Not only is the sample small, it is a convenience sample of white, middle-class and upper-middle-class stepfather families. The results should not be generalized to ethnic minority groups, low socio-economic status populations, or stepmother families.

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Table 1.

Reliability and Validity Coefficients for Each Scale

Measures	Scale: Marital Happiness	Fathers' Compet.	Role Ambiguity
Internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha)			
Husband form	.84	.75	
Wife form	.81	.80	
Couple level score			.73
Test retest reliability (2 week interim)			
Husband form	.95	.87	
Wife form	.81	.96	
Couple level score			.82
Construct validity Comparison with Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale			
Husband form (n=10)	.73		
Wife form (n=10)	.75		

Note. N=84 unless otherwise noted. All correlations are significant at $p < .05$ or better.

Table 2.

Means of Dependent Measure Scores for Significant Results from Analyses of Variance Using Custody Arrangement, Stepfather's Prior Children, Sex of Adolescent, and Age of Adolescent as Independent Variables

Dependent Measures		Girls	Boys
Marital satisfaction[a]	Joint custody	1.3	1.7
(Reported by wife)	Maternal custody	1.8	1.7
Marital satisfaction[a]	Joint custody	1.2	1.8
(Reported by husband)	Maternal custody	1.7	1.5
Wife's relationship with	Older adolescents	1.9	1.4
Ex-husband[a]	Younger adolesc.	1.1	1.7

		Family structure	
		Complex	Simple
Role ambiguity[b]	Joint custody	2.0	2.4
	Maternal custody	2.1	2.0
Competition betwn			
fathers[b]	Older adolescents	2.0	1.8
(Reported by wife)	Younger adolesc.	1.7	2.1
Competition betwn fathers[b]		1.4	1.8

(Reported by husband)

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[a]Lower scores denote more satisfaction.

[b]Higher scores denote more ambiguity and competition.